

NOTES OF A VISIT TO THE ISLAND OF ERROMANGA,  
NEW HEBRIDES, IN MAY, 1894.

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Erromanga was first discovered by Captain Cook in 1774. He landed at the east side of the island, but withdrew in face of a hostile demonstration by the natives, and fired on them, so their first contact with white men was unfriendly. Cook named the high land near the spot where he landed and was attacked Traitor's Head. The Missionary, Rev. H. A. Robertson, suspects, however, that they must have seen white men before Cook landed. Knowing the customs of the people well he thinks they would have acted differently if he had been actually the first white man they saw. This is only an inference; there is no evidence, and probably never will be any to bear it out. The next contact with white men was even worse. Before 1835 the island was occupied by sandal wood traders, who cut and exported the sandal wood which grew abundantly in the forests, and was visited occasionally by trading vessels, who did not cultivate friendly relations with the natives. Every beach on Erromanga has been the scene of some tragedy, and sometimes even the sandal wood has been taken away covered with blood. It is said that 300 white people and others not natives of Erromanga lost their lives during this period. The sandal wood is gone now and the trade extinct.

The Erromangans are by no means a weak people—either physically or intellectually; many of those I have seen are men of good physique and strong character. They have the reputation

of being the only people in the New Hebrides who actually killed their missionaries. Although the missionary is at present the principal personage on the island, and could if he chose control the government, he has wisely refrained from doing so. The government is, therefore, still in the hands of the chiefs. The island is unlike some others in the New Hebrides in that it is occupied by one race who speak one language, although there are local dialects. The people are divided into tribes, who formerly were hostile to one another, and frequently engaged in war. The land was divided into shires, somewhat like our counties. That in which Dillon's Bay is located is called *Lo-itnatman*, meaning "The Kingdom of Men." It extends for about 8 miles north and 12 miles south of Umbongkora, or Dillon's Bay, and contained the dominant tribes. The tribes on the south were generally more manly and warlike than the Northerners. The head chiefs were supreme over each tribe, and there were under chiefs, but there was no one man over all the island. The chieftainship in each case is hereditary from father to son, although sometimes some stronger man might usurp and hold the power.

This form of government still remains in its main outlines, but is now much modified in practice by the influence of the teachers, who are usually the best men on the island, often, though not always, chiefs themselves. A habit is growing up of consulting one another and of asking the missionary for advice.

Paganism, in the sense of worshipping a multitude of idols, did not exist in Erromanga; in fact they had no idols, but they worshipped their dead ancestors, whom they called "*Natemas*," and to whom they offered food,—which the rats ate. They had a place of the dead, but no Heaven. No one was believed to die a natural death; if he did not die in battle he was bewitched by some sacred man either at his own instance or on behalf of some one else. If the sacred man obtained possession of any article belonging to a person whom he wished to injure, he could perform certain ceremonies over it which were supposed to involve the death of the owner, and the strange part was that the doomed person hearing of this would in many cases actually die, unless the

articles were recovered in time, or the sorcerer killed. One might engage a sacred man to bewitch another against whom he had a grudge, but the sacredness of the exorcist did not prevent his sometimes losing his life in consequence. An instance of this occurred not many years ago on the shores of Dillon's Bay when such a man was shot to prevent his bewitching a person from whom he had taken a piece of sugar cane.

The people also worshipped the moon, which was symbolised by "Navelah" or Sacred Stones. These were cut in the form of large rings, and jealously guarded and kept buried by the sacred men. They were produced at the periodical heathen feasts and passed on from tribe to tribe, being joint property.

These feasts are in themselves comparatively innocent. There is a great expense for food on the part of the chiefs or tribes who are hosts for the time; a tower of poles fastened to a tall tree is built like a scaffolding, and pigs, yams, &c., are hung on it, sometimes in hundreds. The people come and sing, dance and feast; and if that were all they might be ignored. But it is at these feasts that mischief is planned and often carried out, so the missionaries have necessarily set their faces against them. In heathen times cannibalism accompanied these feasts, but that is now a thing of the past. Cannibalism was not rampant on Erromanga. The chiefs and great men ate their victims, but many a man never tasted human flesh. There are still a few persons alive who were cannibals, but soon it will be entirely a thing of the far past.

The marriage customs of the Erromangans were interesting. Polygamy prevailed, and when a man died his brother inherited his wives. Marriages were not arranged by the people most concerned, but by the tribe. In heathen days the girl was sold, and she was often betrothed in her childhood. If when she grew up she refused to join her husband she could be forced to do so, and if her husband cared to venture he might come and steal her away. Her friends might kill him if he belonged to a hostile tribe, but would not pursue him. Now, when a girl is marriageable, her parents and near relations look out for a husband for her,

and when they have settled the locality to which their intertribal interests require her to go, she is asked whom in that place she would like for a husband. When she has made her choice the man is asked, and then they come to the missionary to have the ceremony performed. It is very difficult to ascertain the name of a married woman. Native etiquette in such matters is strict, and no man will tell it. She is called the wife of So and So. This is after all much like our own custom of calling married women Mrs. So and So, and dropping their maiden and Christian names. But in Erromanga a man even will hardly tell you his own name; he somehow does not like to do so, but his friend will tell it.

The women in former times were dressed much better than the men. The latter wore hardly any clothing, while the women wore skirts made from the leaves of the pandanus or the bark of the the hibiscus. Girls, unmarried women and widows wore short skirts, betrothed and married women wore long skirts. The shoulders would be covered with a piece of tappa or native cloth. The Erromangan name for this cloth is "Namās-itsa," which means simply beaten cloth. It was made by beating the inner bark of a banyan tree on a log with a wooden beater called "Næko." The result was a tough serviceable material. The women still wear the native dresses, but calicoes and coloured prints have taken the place of the beaten cloth. The men now wear a lava-lava of calico or print and a shirt. It makes a dress very like the Scotchman's kilt, except that it is light enough for use in a tropical climate. Many, however, have attained to the dignity of trousers, shirts, coats and hats. The head-dress of the women now is a coloured handkerchief—of the men a comb.

The weapons of the Erromagans consisted of clubs, bows and arrows, spears and stone hatchets. There were three kinds of clubs:— "Telungumti" (splitear), the starheaded club, which was made at the south of the island and is now very rare; "Netnevrie," a club with a flattened disc at each end, and divided into two parts of unequal length by a pair of similar discs, the shorter part being thickened or bulged; "Novwan" (fruit), a club similar in shape, but with a raised beading along

one side. The bows are made of a hard red wood from a tree resembling the willow ; they are shaped by means of a pig's tusk, which scrapes away the wood without breaking or cutting the fibre as a knife or sharp tool would do. They are stained with cocoanut oil and smoke, and in course of time acquire a beautiful dark polish. The arrows are made from the reeds which grow everywhere in abundance, the barbs being from the wood of the tree-fern, neatly lashed into the reeds by a strand of cocoanut fibre. Spears were made of wood and sometimes with a barb of tree-fern, but were not much used. Stone axes were rather a tool than a weapon ; they were used for cutting down trees, digging out canoes with the aid of fire, and other such work ; they were roughly set in wooden handles. The axe now in use is a modern iron blade, into which is set a native club handle, forming a useful weapon, a combination of old and new civilisation.

The Erromangan canoe is usually made from the trunk of the bread fruit tree. It is roughly shaped, and hollowed out, formerly with primitive tools, by fire and patient digging ; now it is made more easily with iron tools ; it is steadied by an outrigger. There is no ornamentation or fancy work about it, and the fastenings are simply lashings of cocoanut fibre. These canoes are very light and buoyant. They are propelled by paddles, and sometimes by sails, but they are never of any great size : the largest would carry perhaps five or six men.

The food of the Erromangans consists principally of yams, cocoanuts, breadfruit, taro, native cabbage a kind of hibiscus, native beans, and other local products, with fish, fowl or pig occasionally. A primitive but efficient system of cultivation is followed. The yam garden consists of a clearance in the forest where the yams are planted, and the creeper trained over canes and trunks of trees. The garden implements consist of a pointed stick and a pair of hands. Some gardens are fenced in, and so luxuriant is the vegetation that the fences sprout and grow—giving an appearance of truth to the saying, “If you plant your walking-stick it will grow.” These clearances are not used two years in succession, but each year the old garden is abandoned

and a new clearance made. The cooking oven is made by scooping a hollow in the ground, lining it with stones and lighting a fire on it. When the stones are thoroughly hot the fire is scraped away, the food to be cooked is wrapped up in banana leaves, placed in the oven, covered up with the hot stones, ashes and earth, and left till ready. The tongs used for lifting the heated stones are simply a branch of a tree split up for two or three feet. I have tasted native puddings cooked in that way and found them very enjoyable.

The houses are built of reeds interlaced and covered with thatch, and can be made very comfortable; they are open at one end, and the fireplace is just at the entrance. The stem of the bastard cotton wood is much used for rafters and uprights. It is a soft perishable wood, but as it grows in crooked shapes it naturally fits the curves of the roof, and the smoke of the fire seems to preserve it. Some of the houses rise in graceful curves from the ground to the ridge about 15 or 20 feet high, others have straight sides and a roof starting about six feet from the ground.

The Erromangan words of salutation are "Kik-e-pou" (my love to you), the same expression being used both for welcome and farewell; the following are a few other words of the native language:—

NATIVE WORD.	TRANSLATION.	PRONUNCIATION.
Erromanga	the name of the island	Eromang-a
Umbogkora	name of place at Dillon's Bay	Umbongkora
Misi	Mr. or Missionary	meesee
elum	come	ælum
elum kik	come thou	ælum kyk
eve	go, begone	avæ
itnum	haste ye	ytnum
owi lap	wait	oweelap
asso	pull	asso
ire	to-day	eere
dan	day	dan
būmrok	night	boomrock

NATIVE WORD.	TRANSLATION.	PRONUNCIATION.
aipaunen	sun	nypnoonen
Itis	moon	ytees
mosi	star	mosee
ōrun mosi	stars	ōrun mosee
pot	head or principal	pot
nūp	yam	noop
tal	taro	tal
nos	banana	nos
taiek	Fiji banana	ta-ee-æk
nessi	popow apple	næsee
alēepo	sleep	alæepo
yx	me	yow
enyx	mine	eenyow
kīk	thou	kyk
monokowo	yes	monochowo
tawi	no	tawee
kù ?	or	koo
marima	just now, immediately	mareema
metùk	gently (as pouring into a bottle)	meetook
pah	alas	pah
kik-e-px	my love to you	kyk-æ-pow
kimi-e-px	love to you all	kymee-æ-pow

Specimens of the articles described in this paper are to be seen in the Australian Museum.